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Acts of Consumption: Spiritual and Material Food in the Towneley Plays

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This discussion explores three plays from the Towneley collection, uniquely extant in San Marino, Huntington Library, HM 1, exploring their alimentary language within a context of late medieval holiday playing. *Prima Pastorum, Secunda Pastorum* and *Mactacio Abel* all contain verifiable references to a small area between modern Wakefield and Dewsbury. All feature language and imagery related to hunger, appetite, pleasure, satiation and digestion. Such references engage with the rituals of fasting, mass, procession and feasting which characterised feast-days, incorporating audiences' somatic experiences into the devotional and didactic work demanded by Biblical drama. Two key aspects of the plays' alimentary dramaturgy are discussed here: their use of food to produce feelings of spiritual joy, and their deployment of digestive metaphors to encourage thoughtful and engaged collective learning. As demonstrated below, this engagement with alimentation belies any polarising alignment of invisible food with the sacred and real food with the secular or profane.

Keywords: Towneley Plays; medieval drama; performance; devotional literature; food

The alimentary language extant in Towneley's *Prima* and *Secunda Pastorum* and *Mactacio Abel* implies a tacit dialogue with the real rituals of fasting and feasting which surrounded late medieval feast-day playing. Their references to hunger, appetite, satiation and digestion constitute a dynamic alimentary dramaturgy—a term used here to describe the plays' integration of real-world experiences of food and drink to shape spectators' responses to Biblical narratives. Examination of the two *Pastorum* plays reveals their appropriation of the positive affect generated by feast-day gustation, as they turn visceral alimentary pleasure into an embodied meditation on the Nativity. The digestive language of *Prima Pastorum* and *Mactacio Abel,* explored thereafter, positions spectators as a community of good learners, who consume their feast-day edification as carefully and as cheerfully as they might wish to consume their feast-day repast. These functions do not reduce the plays to pious devotion, but allow them to hold spiritual edification alongside festive pleasure in productive tension, generating wonder at the material world's miraculous capacity to be simultaneously sacred and profane.

In positioning written plays in dialogue with real alimentary practices, this discussion draws from Matthew Sergi's examination of the "practical cues" (2020, 2) extant in the Chester play texts. Sergi argues that Chester's written witnesses are filled with implicit cues for action originating in local performance practices, cues so obvious to contemporaries and near-contemporaries as to render explicit stage-direction unnecessary (2020, 7–8). Thus, "the extant Chester play texts, even in the absence of decisive origins, dates, or connections to documented events, do engage with live performance in legible and demonstrable ways" (Sergi 2020, 5). There are no decisive records detailing possible performances of the Towneley plays in medieval West Yorkshire, despite dialectical and textual evidence supporting a connection to that region (Palmer 1993, 220–21). Claims for the collection's date have ranged from the late-fourteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries, but there has been a gradual preference for a Tudor or Marian Revival dating (Carey 1930, 2; Palmer 1988, 323; Stevens and Cawley 1994, xv; Happé 2007, 17; Coletti and McMurray Gibson 2010, 236; Porcheddu 2014; King 2014, 541). This has led some to read the plays as nostalgic tributes to largely lost performance practices (Epp 2018, "Introduction"; King 2014, 541). For Sergi (2020, 17), the antiquarian nature of the Chester manuscripts should not restrict study to sixteenth-century historical contexts. Even where copyists "misremember, deviate, or fabricate," they do so according to "durable conceptions of performance shared among early Cestrians, determining at a habitual level what could make sense in performance, and thus what does make sense in the extant texts" (Sergi 2020, 17–18). Although the Towneley play texts are removed from actual dramatic praxis, their alimentary language similarly preserves local understandings of performance derived from real playing.

The three play texts selected here contain verifiable references to proximate locations between modern Wakefield and Dewsbury, supporting the contention that their alimentary references reflect shared local understandings of Biblical drama. *Mactacio Abel*'s "Gudeboure at the quarell hede" (Stevens and Cawley 1994, I, 22:369) refers to Goody Bower, a quarry to the northwest of Wakefield, attested in the *Survey of English Place-Names* (*SEPN*) from the fifteenth-century (*SEPN,* s.v. *Goody Bower*).[1] *Prima Pastorum's* reference to "good ayll of Hely" (116:352) has sometimes been associated with Ely in Cambridgeshire, a town known for its beer production (Speirs 1957, 333; Morgan 1964, 679; Epp 2013, 89). Epp (2013, 89) claims that there is no record of a *Healey* in West Yorkshire prior to the eighteenth century, but the *SEPN* records attestations of such a site to the southwest of Wakefield from 1203 and 1599 (*SEPN,* s. v. *Healey*). Its

[1] All further references to Towneley plays are to Stevens and Cawley's (1994) edition, with page and line numbers included in parentheses.

evocation here corresponds to the similarly local "ale of Halton" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 130:117) mentioned by Chester's Shepherds, and it is likely that both were designed to engage local knowledge and appetites. *Secunda Pastorum* mentions the "shrogys" of "Horbery" (145:657) a major settlement close to Healey, attested in the *SEPN* from 1086 (*SEPN,* s.v. *Horbury*). Epp, who sees *horbery* as a variant of *harboury*, meaning "shelter," does not capitalise the word in his edition (Epp 2013, 91; Epp 2018, "The Shepherds (2)," l. 657). Since the First Shepherd (*Primus Pastor*) states "I thoght that we layd vs/Full nere Yngland" a few stanzas earlier, Epp suggests that "he is ostensibly *not* in England, and thus not in or near Horbury" (2013, 90). Yet *Prima Pastorum*'s reference to local "Horbery" is no stranger than the Chester *Goldsmiths'* reference to "nearby Scotland" (Sergi 2020, 56). Both exemplify medieval Biblical drama's anti-realistic tendency to oscillate between the world of spectators and the world of the play.

Discussions of Towneley's alimentary language have naturally focused on the staged feast of the *Prima Pastorum,* famously dismissed by A. C. Cawley as "a ludicrous gallimaufry that can never have existed except in [the playwright's] imagination" (Cawley 1955, 215). Informed by Cawley's assessment of the feast's impossibility, several commentators have elaborated on the symbolic significance of a mimed, invisible meal. For Margery Morgan, the imaginary feast demonstrates "the uncertainty of all human truth" (1964, 681); for Martin Stevens, it makes "a statement about the inconsequential nature of the material in contrast with the centrality of the spiritual" (1977, 113); and for Lois Roney it affectionately mimics a "way of seeing" the invisible which characterised Sacramental rituals (1983, 717–20). V. A. Kolve (1966) sees the feast as a more direct gesture towards contemporary life. Recognising, in its eclectic array of dishes, a festive pooling of food contributions from different ranks of society, he suggests that the feast invests the play "with some of the mood and custom of medieval Christmas celebration, familiar in every detail to its original audience" (Kolve 1966, 161). Notwithstanding, for Kolve, the feast ultimately remains "a dramatic metaphor," symbolising the "plenty" brought about by the birth of Christ (166).

Kolve's conclusion reflects his understanding of Towneley as a cycle. The Shepherds' onstage meal cannot gesture towards an actual Christmas celebration if it was performed, alongside the other plays, at Corpus Christi (Kolve 1966, 166). Barbara Palmer's reassessment of Towneley as a "West Yorkshire *compilatio*" (Palmer 1993, 228, cf. Palmer 1988) has allowed others to explore the possibility that certain plays were attached to specific occasions, such as Easter and Christmas (Johnston 1998, 3; Johnston 2015, 134). In light of such findings, Ernst Gerhardt has extended Kolve's position on *Prima Pastorum*, arguing that "rather than simply evoking the idea of Christmas festivity," the foods described

"offer evidence of the play's performance at such a festive event" (Gerhardt 2019, 13). Indeed, the Third Shepherd's demand "Gett mete, gett,/And sett vs a borde" (114:281–82) is a strong candidate for identification as a "practical cue," as defined by Sergi (2020, 8). A laid table is so inconsistent with the play's rural landscape and rustic characters that it almost certainly cues an object within spectators' real-world surroundings.

Gerhard's understanding of the play's "entanglement with an alimentary performance context" (2019, 13) invites a reassessment of the feast's dramatic and symbolic significance. For Gerhardt, *Prima Pastorum*'s interactions with a real atmosphere of convivial festive hospitality enhance its celebration of the Nativity:

> Whereas critics have thought that the imaginariness of the shepherds' feast demonstrates the play's opposition of the shepherds' poverty and hunger with Christ's satisfaction of their spiritual destitution, the shared Christmas feast includes all participants in a communal and festive celebration of Christ's birth. (Gerhardt 2019, 27)

Sergi also argues that "practical cues throughout the Chester plays prompted public feasting" (2020, 74), drawing from Guild records to show that real foods were purchased for the staged feast of the *Painters'* play (84–85). These comestibles were consumed by the Chester Shepherds in a "playful display of public gluttony" which "affirmed the social cohesion of the Cestrian community . . . and the place of lay piety within that practical system" (88). Like Gerhardt, Sergi puts hospitality, festivity and commensality at the heart of the dramatic significance of the Shepherds' onstage feasting. This is in line with his broader argument that Chester's practical cues tend to point towards dramatic "crowd-pleasers," evidencing "a performative lay devotion that was itself raucously fun, expressed in less orderly and theologically rigorous terms, but not necessarily less pious terms, than previous readings have allowed" (Sergi 2020, 10).

Although Sergi's findings have been formative here, it should not be assumed that the motivations behind Towneley's alimentary dramaturgy are identical to those of Chester. Sergi is sceptical of the Eucharistic readings which have dominated analysis of food in the Chester plays (2020, 76), arguing that "the Eucharistic feast's presence at Chester's festivities, while still central to devotional symbolism, is reframed by the plays as part of a broader tradition of secular commensality" (86). Sergi observes a contrasting "failure of commensality" in Towneley's *Prima Pastorum,* placing the Shepherds' bickering and distribution of food as alms in "stark contrast" with the Chester Shepherds' unapologetic civic gluttony (85). The Chester play's alimentary dramaturgy revolves around legitimising and consolidating "guild commensality" (93–94), but the lack of a comprehensive guild structure in late medieval Wakefield has

been a key consideration in discrediting the plausibility of a Wakefield cycle (Palmer 1988, 322–23). Whilst this discussion highlights the importance of positive affect and communal festivity in Towneley's alimentary dramaturgy, it also considers the continued value of theological interpretations of food. This does not presuppose a highly learned and sophisticated audience well versed in theology, nor does it position pious didacticism as the plays' primary motive. However, the integration of real food into Biblical narrative must be contextualised within contemporary, encultured understandings of a material world "in which physical stuff announces and discloses a creator whose nature (eternal, immutable, and unknowable) is the opposite of matter" (Bynum 2011, 285). The plays' alimentary dramaturgy captures some of the ontological implications of belief in the Incarnation and Real Presence, but these doctrinally engaged uses of food are not reducible to the simple effacement or devaluation of the material world.

Unlike *Prima Pastorum, Secunda Pastorum* and *Mactacio Abel* do not contain staged feasts. Nevertheless, the findings of Gerhardt (2019) and Sergi (2020) indicate the value of reading alimentary language as a cue for likely performance practices. Eleven of the twenty-five Chester plays "cue visible eating, drinking, or serving among the performers" and many of the cycle's "nonbiblical scenes and embellishments" involve "the consumption or exchange of comestibles" (Sergi 2020, 74). *Secunda Pastorum* and *Mactacio Abel* feature subtler instances of alimentary language, but these are similarly extrabiblical, suggesting purposeful engagement with the embodied experience of spectators. The analysis below highlights the value of approaching alimentary language as inherently dramatic, indicative of the local performance practices which shaped the plays' written form.

Food and Affect

Rather than indexing each and every item likely to have been present at a Christmas celebration, *Prima Pastorum* draws attention to the carnivorous dishes which would have elicited the greatest excitement. Advent was a time of particularly stringent fasting, with practices of abstinence intensifying in the days before Christmas (Kolve 1966, 162). In the lyric known as "Farewell! Advent," James Ryman's complaints about "lak of mete," "stinking fishe," "browne" bread, and "thin" ale accentuate his celebratory conclusion: "Advent is gone, Christemas is come, / Be we mery now, alle and some!" (Davies 1963, 231–32). A rare and long-awaited abundance of meat would have been at the forefront of Christmas celebrations, since "great feasts were made of [the] temporary surfeit" following the seasonal slaughter of livestock (Kolve 1966, 164). The Second Shepherd highlights a conspicuous absence of pottages with his joyful exclamation "We

myster no sponys / Here at oure mangyng" (115:333–34), expressing a delight in carnivorous abundance which must have resonated with audiences just emerging from the privations of advent.

At the funeral feasts recently examined by Christopher Dyer (occasions of communal eating for which unusually detailed records survive), fruits, vegetables and pottages are similarly omitted, presumably "thought to be too ordinary for a funeral meal" (Dyer 2023, 15). However, most accounts contain references to bread and cheese, other ordinary staples of the medieval peasantry (Dyer 2023, 5–7). Dyer notes some recorded cases of "unambiguously generous" (2023, 3) hospitality at Christmas, such as the famous carnivorous feast held by Alice de Breyne in 1431 for 300 tenants and strangers, but accounts of Christmas feasting tend to mention humbler foods too (Kolve 1966, 164; Dyer 2023, 3). In *Prima Pastorum,* all such items are excluded from the Shepherds' dialogue. Even the scraps given to the poor are described as "mete" (117:406) reinforcing a hyperbolic carnivorousness which, whilst strongly evocative of Christmas culinary practices, is unlikely to have accurately reflected most people's experiences of festive hospitality.

For Dyer, meat was a particular status symbol in the burial meals of peasants (Dyer 2023, 12). The 1451 funeral meal of Thomas Vicars, an exceptionally wealthy demesne farmer of Strensall, North Yorkshire, involved greater expenditure on meat than that of Henry Bowett, Archbishop of York, d. 1423 (Dyer 2023, 5, 11–12). So much was roasted during the week's mind that it took eight men to turn the spits (Dyer 2023, 12). Yet Vicars's funeral feast involved an expenditure of only 7*s* on spices, a far smaller sum than the £2 6*s*. 8*d*. required to send off Archbishop Bowet (Dyer 2023, 11–12). Dyers suggests that such modest expenditure on spices indicates "a prestigious dish for a few distinguished guests" (Dyer 2023, 12)–perhaps something like the "tart for a lorde" (115:339) appearing in *Prima Pastorum*. The lavish, aristocratic feasts recorded in Austin's *Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery-Books* include a range of custards, tarts, jellies, frumenties and mawmennies (Austin 1888, 57–69), dishes which prioritise delicate spicing over carnivorous excess (cf. Austin 1888, 22, 50, 55, 74–75, 86–88, 95–98, 105). Although the *tart* of *Prima Pastorum* suggests the feast's luxury, its designation *for a lorde* evokes a singular dish prepared for a small elite. The interests of the majority are reflected in the menagerie that otherwise constitutes the shepherds' repast. This is pitched, like the funeral feast of Vicars, to excite ordinary people, whose hungry post-advent cravings would have been for flesh, blood and fat, not ginger and galangal. Audiences experiencing a long-awaited Christmas feast would surely have seen their own excitement mirrored in the Shepherds' delighted dialogue, their eyes similarly drawn to the most special and appealing foods. These visceral experiences of relief and joy are then applied to the infant Christ in the second part of the play. The genuine excitement elicited

by a "leueryng" between "Two blodyngs" (114:313–14) is converted, *a fortiori,* into delight in the child lying "Betwixt two bestys" (118:438).

Yet *Prima Pastorum* also attaches clear warnings to gluttonous indulgence. The Shepherds bicker over their ale ("Ye hold long the skayll; / Now lett me go to," 116:359-60), swear ("Therfor choke the the deyll!," 117:394), and there is even a suggestion of lechery in the Third Shepherd's desire for the bottle ("By my thryft, we must kys!" 116:380). Anti-tavern invective often presents gluttony as a kind of "gateway sin," ushering in other vices. In Passus V of *Piers Plowman* (s. xiv^{2}), Gluttony's extended bout of drinking leads to "grete othes," avaricious "chaffare," a complete inability to "acorden in truthe," and, finally, "an accidie" (Schmidt 1995, B:5:307–60). In the *Speculum Vitae* (s. xiv$^{3/4}$), gluttony initiates a downward spiral culminating in a shameful death: "by þe necke to hynge at þe last" (Hanna 2008, II, 448). The Shepherds' descent into sinfulness (albeit short-lived) reflects a familiar characterisation of gluttony as the "gate of synnes," to quote *Jacob's Well* (s. xv^{med}), "be þe whiche alle oþ*er*e synnes entryn in-to man" (Brandeis 1900, 145). When the Third Shepherd enthusiastically suggests "Gett mete, gett, / And sett vs a borde; / Then may we go dyne, / Oure bellys to fyll" (114:281–84), the Second counsels "Abyde vnto syne" (114:285), suggesting that they wait a while before eating. To audiences familiar with anti-tavern invective, "Abyde vnto syne" may well have announced the slide into iniquity that inevitably follows gluttony, punning on *syne* as both "later" (*MED*, s.v. *sin,* adv.) and "sin:" ("Now wait for sin!"). Indeed, his words become a comically self-fulfilling prophecy, as they immediately incur the wrath of the Third Shepherd, who, irate at the suggestion that he should wait for a well-deserved drink, complains "I fare full yll / At youre mangere" (144:290–91). At the core of this farcical interaction is a reminder of the well-known dangers of gluttony, a warning which must have resonated with spectators in the throes of a festive celebration.

This code-switching between revelry and invective creates contrary affective states, alternately framing the feast as a celebration of the Nativity, and as a guilty profanation. Sergi attributes similar moments in the Chester plays to their playful capacity to "simultaneously lampoon antitavern invective, celebrate the fun of drinking, and criticize excessive gluttony" (2020, 111). However, such ambivalence also reflects a fundamentally Incarnational understanding of the material world as both sacred and profane. Roney has approached Towneley's two *Pastorum* plays as companion pieces, suggesting that *Prima* is essentially Eucharistic and *Secunda* essentially Incarnational in focus (1983, 698). The imaginary status of *Prima Pastorum*'s feast is central to her argument, as invisible food can be understood as an affectionate mimicry of the transubstantiation of visible bread into invisible flesh (Roney 1983, 717–20). Reading the food items as practical cues to real public feasting complicates such a reading. Whilst it is somewhat artificial to distinguish between the sacrament

of the Eucharist and the embodied deity that it contains (cf. Kolve 1966, 165; Rubin 1992, 135–39), the Incarnation and Eucharist hold broadly different emphases when it comes to the material world. Both imply matter's capacity to contain and announce a divinity which, paradoxically, transcends it. However, whereas the Eucharist ultimately prioritises the invisible over the visible, asserting that the true reality of the Host is belied by its sensible form, the Incarnation celebrates Christ's redemption and elevation of the material world.

Prima Pastorum's celebration of real food revels in a corporeal humanity which is soon to be shared with Christ. In Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (s. xv[1]), a work with well-observed connections to late medieval drama (cf. Woolf 1972, 184; Beadle 1997, 1–6; King 2014, 77; Karnes 2007, 383), Christ's alimentary activities provide proof of his humanity. Whereas Love's source text, the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (s. xiv[med]) suggests that Christ ate, slept and worked only to exemplify "humility, poverty, affliction and bodily exertion" (Ragusa and Green 1961, 201), the *Mirror* asserts that he was "shewyng in þat & al oþer nedes of mankynde þat he was verrey man" (Sargent 2004, 64:14–15). Eating similarly proves Christ's humanity in Towneley's *Thomas of India* play, where he eats fish and honeycomb in front of the Apostles: "Now will I ette, as I was won, / My manhede eft to tast" (373:199–200). Yet, this genuine humanity is coupled, incomprehensively, with absolute divinity. As noted in the *Cursor Mundi*'s (s. xiv[1]) extended meditation upon the Incarnation, Christ is rightly called "Selcut," (or "wonderful"), because a child who is "bath man and godd al hale" is "selcuth er a thusand-fald" than anything possible in nature (Morris 1874–92, II, 566).

By never fully condemning and now ever fully condoning the feast in which it participates, *Prima Pastorum* upholds both the joy of eating and the guilt of gluttony as irreconcilable truths. This ambivalence towards feasting reflects the ontological conditions of a paradoxical material world made both sacred and profane by the birth of Christ. Although his humanity elevates and legitimises alimentary activity, celebrating his divinity through corporeal indulgence remains base and unworthy. *Prima Pastorum*'s celebration of the Nativity is thus inflected with a sense of the wonderful and unresolved contradictoriness of the new world that the Shepherds are entering.

Secunda Pastorum foregrounds a comparative absence of food. Mak's reference to "gentill Iohn Horne . . . With the greatt shank" who "made all the garray" (149:813–15) cues spectators with an awareness of at least one previous performance of *Prima Pastorum,* in which a long-legged individual played the Second Shepherd. Stevens and Cawley associate Horne's "garray" with the argument over imaginary sheep (1994, II, 508), and Epp glosses this word as "disturbance" (2018, "The Shepherds (2)," l. 814). This sense of pugnacity is consistent with Towneley's other reference to the "garray," or "army," of Pharaoh,

and the *Middle English Dictionary* suggests an etymological connection to Old French *guerreier* meaning "to make war" (*MED*, s.v. *garrai*, n.). The *MED* relies entirely on Towneley for its definition of *garray*, but the *OED* provides further examples of usage, all Northern English or Scottish. Two sixteenth-century Scots examples collocate *garray* with words denoting festivity: "in garray and in gam" and "ffor garray and for glew" (*OED,* s.v. *garray*, n., sense b). Two later usages relate to the suppression of festivities in Yorkshire. One, from 1606, condemns illicit "drinkinges or garries" in Normanby, the other, ostensibly from 1725, denounces "garrays or merry nights" in Leeds (*OED,* s.v. *garray*, n., sense b).[2] A comparable example from 1612 is listed in the *Yorkshire Historical Dictionary,* referring to "wakes, festes, garries, helpales" and other "disordered meetings" in Pontefract (*Yorkshire Historical Dictionary,* s.v. *garray*). Besides the Towneley examples, every recorded instance of *garray* in these dictionaries refers to some kind of festivity. Although "commotion" is ubiquitously listed as part of the word's meaning, such rowdiness appears to be far closer to "merrymaking" than "quarrelling." In this context, it is entirely likely that *Pharaoh*'s uniquely military use of *garray* evokes the rowdy revellers cued by its opening call for "Peas" (71:1), playfully enlisting them into the army of its eponymous villain. The word's appearance in *Secunda Pastorum* carries similarly festive connotations, recalling John Horne's participation in public merrymaking.

Since Towneley's two *Pastorum* plays assume a shared audience, *Secunda* may have provided an alternative playing option for occasions lacking any formal feast. Mak's words might therefore have drawn attention to a comparative lack of *garray* surrounding this play. Notwithstanding, *Secunda Pastorum*'s constant denial of food contrasts sharply with the indulgences of *Prima*. This play continuously subverts the expectation for a "hearty feast," as was "conventionally associated with the shepherds" (Sergi 2020, 77). In *Prima Pastorum* and its Chester equivalent, the Shepherds begin their feast as soon as they are all assembled (113:276–77; Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 127:55–56). *Secunda Pastorum*'s Third Shepherd expresses similar hopes: "A drynk fayn wold I haue, / And somewhat to dyne" (132:211–12), but he is turned down by the others. This sense of unsatisfied hunger permeates the play's comic action. Mak is ravenous throughout, complaining "My belly farys not weyll" (136:330) and claiming "I ete not an nedyll / Thys moneth and more" (337–38). As soon as he brings the stolen sheep home, he declares, with greedy urgency, "I wold he were flayn; / I lyst well ete" (139:465–66). However, the Shepherds' arrival at his house defers this satisfaction. Mak and Gyll's farcical presentation of the sheep as their new baby

[2] The late date attributed to the latter is dubious. The citation comes from an antiquarian history of Leeds which, during its discussion of the first decade of the seventeenth-century, paraphrases an unidentified court order, apparently issued "soon after the Plague had passed away" (Atkinson 1868, 70).

is filled with reminders of their hunger. Telling the Shepherds "When he wakyns he kyppys / That ioy is to se" (149:803–4), and "When he wakyns he wepys" (150:840), Mak looks forward to skinning and eating his "child." Gyll ironically swears "If euer I you begyld, / That I ete this chylde / That lygys in this credyll" (148:774-76), and her maternal prayer "gyf me ioy of my chylde" (149:795) hungrily anticipates the pleasure of eating it.

Whereas *Prima Pastorum* incorporates alimentary festivity into its celebration of the Nativity, *Secunda Pastorum* takes a much clearer stance on the pre-eminence of spiritual food. Unlike Mak and Gyll, the Shepherds show a burgeoning awareness that the human soul needs more than just physical nourishment. As they search for their lost sheep the Third Shepherd resolves "Shall I neuer ete brede, / The sothe to I wytt" (146:675–76), the First Shepherd answers "Nor drynk in my heede, / With hym tyll I mete" (146:677–78), and the Second promises "Tyll I se hym in sight, / Shall I neuer slepe one nyght" (146:684). This emphasis on *brede*, *drynk* and *sight* clearly evoke the sacramental ritual, wherein the salubrious sight of Christ's flesh and blood was contrived to feed parishioners just as properly as the host itself (Rubin 1992, 57). During his search of Mak's home, the Third Shepherd also remarks:

> I can fynde no flesh,
> Hard nor nesh,
> Salt nor fresh-
> Bot two tome platers. (149:786–89)

Eucharistic bread and wine do not yet exist for the Shepherds. However, their intuitive search for "hard" and "soft" flesh indicates a developing awareness of the spiritual food that they need, the "two tome platters" highlighting to audiences that neither component is to be found at Mak's house. When offered some refreshment by Mak, the Second Shepherd declines, as "nawther mendys oure mode / Drynke nor mette" (147:727–28), yet when he meets Christ, he instantly understands that this is the sustenance they have been seeking. He rejoices that Christ has come "To slokyn oure syn / And slake it, / Oure kynde, from wo" (154:979–81), and joyfully tells the child "Of oure crede thou art crop; / I wold drynk on thy cop" (156:1046–47).

This rejection of corporeal food, emphasising the superiority of spiritual malnourishment, reflects ways of thinking about the material world which are fundamental to the Eucharistic ritual.

Notwithstanding, the satisfaction associated with this spiritual food derives its affective power from the protestations of physical hunger which punctuate the play's early action. *Secunda Pastorum* does not cue a lavish feast, but it still engages with the familiar rituals of fasting, worship, and eating which often accompanied holiday playing. Fasting readied both body and soul for holy days,

as Mirk's various entreaties to "fast þe euen, and come to chyrche" (Erbe 1905, 18) or "fast . . . and goo i*n* processyon" (Erbe 1905, 137) indicate. However, as John Bromyard acknowledged, the prospect of a feast rendered such abstinence more tolerable, "*sicut pomum puero ostensum facit eum venire ridentem*" ("just as an apple held out to a child makes him come laughing." My translation. Cited in Woolgar 2016, 248, n. 19). A fifteenth-century English-Latin textbook testifies to the satisfaction of hunger following fasting and worship on Corpus Christi day:

> It is the guyse of all cristenn menn this day solemly to praye, fast, and so in procession, as well uplonde as in the towne . . . after the gospell is done, thei fall to ther metes that the wyffs brought from home for the nonys. (Nelson 1956, 264)

The structure of *Secunda Pastorum* mirrors such festive practices. The Shepherds begin the day "fastand" (141:509), and can only be satisfied once they have encountered their saviour. For many individuals, a predictable cycle of nagging hunger, anticipation, and happy satiation would have characterised feast days. Through the language of alimentary desire and gratification, *Secunda Pastorum* incorporates such experiences into the play's meditation on the desperate longing for salvation that preceded Christ, and the utter satisfaction and joy provided to all through his Incarnate body.

Food and Knowledge

The analogy of eating and learning was well established in medieval monastic writings. Jerome explains the imperative to "eat the book" in Ezekiel 3:2–5 as "the foundation of reading," where "diligent meditation" locks the book in "our memorial treasury" and fills the belly with spiritual satisfaction (Carruthers 2008, 54). St. Augustine compares meditative activity to chewing cud:

> For what else is it to recall something useful that you have heard- as if from the stomach of your memory to the mouth of thought, because of the pleasure of recalling it- but somehow to ruminate on it in a spiritual sense. (Teske and Ramsey 2007, VI:7:100)

Bernard of Clairvaux advocates chewing "with the teeth . . . of the mind" to extract the full flavour of the psalms (Walsh 1971, 41–42), and the Carthusian prior Guigo II compares *[l]ectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplatio* to eating, chewing, savouring, and being delightfully refreshed (cited in Gillespie 2011, 115; my translations). For Mary Carruthers, such formulations are sufficiently ubiquitous that "digestion should be considered another basic functional model for the complementary activities of reading and composition, collection and recollection" (2008, 207).

This conception of edification as food proves to be incredibly durable. Vincent Gillespie, exploring forms of *lectio divina* that appeared in devotional works addressed towards lay readers, notes the influence of an "older monastic view of reading" in *Book to a Mother* (s. xiv[1]), where readers are urged to "chew" and "defie" the "book" which is Christ's life (Gillespie 2011, 125). A homiletic tradition framing preaching as *spiritual food* made *eating the book* accessible to the illiterate. One of Robert Rypon's sermons to the secular clergy of Durham stresses that preachers must acquire the "food of instruction" to effectively "feed a flock already in danger of starvation" (Owst 1926, 29), and Bromyard criticises those who fill their sermons with the entertaining "delicacies" of "laughable matter" rather than "the heavier and more solid food which is more sustaining" (Owst 1926, 185). Addressing the recipients of preaching, the *Cursor Mundi* describes "god sarmu*n*" as "gastli fode" (Morris 1874–92, IV, 1146:25283–84), and the "Easter Sunday" sermon of the *Northern Homily Cycle* (s. xiii/xiv) warns that preaching neither "delitis" nor "savours" those who consume its "gasteli mete" without due attention and devotion (Thompson 2008, 136). Cardinal Reginald Pole's 1556 Legatine Constitutions stress the importance of regular preaching "so that the people may not be cheated of the food of their souls" (Adlington, McCullough and Rhatigan 2012, "Appendixes," III.6), illustrating the survival of this homiletic tradition into Marian, counter-Reformation polemic. In *Prima Pastorum,* the First Shepherd parodically responds to the enumerated comestibles in these well-established terms: "Yee speke all by clergé, / I here by youre clause" (115:346–47). However, there is a kernel of sincerity within this pastiche. The First Shepherd's reference to the *clause* of the feast suggests that he understands its *clergé* in general, rather than scholastic terms. The simple piety of Chaucer's Parson is similarly reflected in his admission that he is "nat textueel," but instead takes "the sentence," or moral essence, of Christian teachings (Burgess 1987, 287:57–58). In whimsically alluding to the *clause* of the feast, the First Shepherd sanctions feasting as an activity which is essentially, if imperfectly, pious. The commensality that the Shepherds share with spectators generates feelings of happiness and kinship which are in the full spirit of Nativity celebration, even if their feasting is neither scripturally accurate nor doctrinally sanctioned.

The "grain" incident of *Prima Pastorum* similarly draws from the well-established metaphorical alignment of learning with eating to legitimise festive piety. In this brief comic interlude, the Third Shepherd empties his sack of grain to prove the emptiness of his fellows' wits:

> So gose youre wyttys owte,
> Evyn as it com in.
> Geder vp
> And seke it agane! (113:250–53)

This episode bears a strong structural and linguistic resemblance to an extant seventeenth-century version of the *Tale of the Men of Gotham* (Eaton 1899, 267–8; Hazlitt 1866, 4–5), and *Garcio*'s unflattering comparison of the Shepherds to the "foles of Gotham" (113:260) cues spectators' familiarity with such a story. *Garcio* concludes that the three men are 'Foles all sam!" (113:258), and subsequent critics have generally concurred (Woolf 1972, 189; Speyser 1981, 10; Adams 1986, 102). However, as A. C. Cawley (1953, 55) has pointed out, the Third Shepherd does not pour his meal into a stream, like the fool of Gotham, but pours it onto the ground where it can easily be retrieved, demonstrating his mastery of the situation. In his reply, the Second Shepherd describes these scattered wits in alimentary terms:

> May we not be fane?
> He has told vs full plane
> Wysdom to sup. (113:254–56)

This "gathering" and "supping" on "wisdom" strongly evokes Augustine's comparison of profitable thinking to bovine rumination, wherein learning is thoughtfully regurgitated and re-consumed to extract its full benefit. Removing the stream from the grain incident thus transforms a foolish farce into an early indication of the Shepherds' latent capacity for learning. After the angelic annunciation, they find themselves elaborating on Old Testament and Classical prefigurations of Christ, citing authorities from Isaiah to Virgil (119:477–121:559). This is not the total transformation it may seem; the birth of Christ, Wisdom incarnate, has simply brought forth a sagacity which was hitherto unrealisable. By positioning spectators alongside the Shepherds as collective eaters, *Prima Pastorum* strongly implies that they are also collective learners.

In contrast, *Mactacio Abel* uses alimentary language to emphasise Cain's epistemic shortcomings. He ignores Abel's counsel that "All that wyrk as the wise / Shall worship God with sacrifice" (14:72–73), applying his own twisted logic to justify a paltry offering. A pedantic sense of *equity* leads Cain to believe that God does not deserve a valuable "tend," because he has not given anything valuable to him:

> We! wherof shuld I tend, leif brothere?
> For I am ich yere wars then othere-
> Here my trouth it is none othere. (15:110–12)

He therefore plans to "serue" God "of the same" (15:131), reckoning his worthless offering to be "euen" (18:234) with the share of felicity that he has received. His declaration "I did hym neuer yit bot skill" (19:262) ironically exposes his self-interested use of *skilful* reasoning to shirk his devotional obligations (*MED*, s.v.

skil, n., esp. 5a, 6b, 8a). He makes his offering tokenistically and without gratitude, complaining "for my saull now mot it go; / Bot it gos sore agans my will" (19:256–57). In contrast, Abel gives his tend "in good entent" to God "that all has sent" (17:180–81), understanding that, since God has made everything, he is owed everything. This, he offers with "stedfast thoght" (17:183), contrasting with Cain's false and self-serving "skill." Each brother utterly rejects the other's epistemological stance, characterising their advice as "vayn carpyng" (14:92; 15:99).

Cain's backwards logic is reflected in a backwards understanding of alimentation. Although his speech is peppered with obscenity, pride of place is given to insults which conflate mouths with backsides: "Com kis myne ars" (13:61); "kys the dwillis toute!" (14:65); "kys the dwills ars behynde" (19:268) and "Com kys the dwill right in the ars!" (20:289). He associates crops with excrement, rather than nutrition, telling Abel to go "ther the good wife strokid the hay" (14:90), and offering his tend with the suggestion that God "myght wipe his ars withall" (18:240). He also tells Abel "Go grese thi shepe vnder the toute" (14:66), echoing his servant Pikeharnes's admission to tying up Cain's beasts and laying their food "behynd thare ars" (13:47). Pikeharnes emulates his master's pedantic adherence to equity, asserting "with the same mesure and weght / That I boro will I qwite" (13:53–55) as he returns Cain's blows. This internalisation of Cain's perverted "lore" (25:457) is reflected in his equally unnatural approach to eating. Furthermore, Cain inverts his social responsibility to feed others. Whereas Abel visits his beasts "To looke if thay be holgh or full" (20:312), Cain starves his servant, who eats less than "half" his "fill" (24:430), and who in turn starves his beasts, who falter for "Want of mete" (13:45). This presumably contributes to Cain's "meyn" (15:113) returns, highlighting his foolish miscontrual of a reciprocal social system which requires that he feed others in order to be fed by them.

Although *Mactacio Abel*'s interactions with specific feasting practices must remain conjectural, hospitality and public commensality are clearly important frameworks for understanding Cain's characterisation. During Cain's shambolic royal proclamation, Pikeharnes constantly interrupts with asides to the audience, using alimentary language to frame his master as an outsider. He mocks Cain's meanness in eating only cold "coyle" (24:428), or cabbage, even though there is "cold rost" (24:424) at home, and complains that he is insufficiency fed himself (24:430–34). As Sergi notes, "just as inclusion in a community requires commensality, the refusal of commensality can result in exclusion" (2020, 95). Whereas *Prima Pastorum* aligns spectators with the Shepherds through their mutual participation in public festivity, Cain's refusal to share or enjoy food positions him as an outsider. This characterisation works at a textual level, but Pikeharnes's incongruous reliance on food in his address to audiences indicates

that a practical cue may be at play here. Maligning Cain in alimentary terms makes his status as a wicked outsider immediately and intuitively comprehensible to audiences engaged in some form of convivial festive eating.

Understood as alimentary dramaturgy, Pikeharnes's use of the verb *Browke* in his final address to audiences offers them an alternative to the fate assigned to Cain:

> Now old and yong, or that ye weynd,
> The same blissyng withoutten end
> All sam then shall ye haue,
> That God of heuen my master has giffen.
> Browke it well whils that ye liffen;
> He vowche it full well safe. (24:446–51)

This use of *Browke* has generally been glossed as "use" or "enjoy" (Raine and Stevenson 1836, 333; England and Pollard 1897, 398; Stevens and Cawley 1994, 662; 2018, "The Killing of Abel," l. 450). Audiences should enjoy their lives while they can, since they are promised the same punishment as Cain. Such a reading is consistent with the ending of the York *Glovers'*, where Cain tells audiences "That curse that I haue for to feill, / I giffe you þe same" (Beadle 1982, 78:138–39), and Chester's *Drapers'*, which closes with "And now I flee, all yee may see. / I grant you all the same gifte" (Luminanski and Mills 1974, 41:703–4). This traditional, cautionary alignment of audiences with Cain appears at the beginning of *Mactacio Abel* too, where Pikeharnes warns audiences "Som of you ar his men" (12:20). However, *browke* also carries connotations of eating, retaining, tolerating and digesting (*MED*, s.v. *brouken*, v.). In light of the alimentary bent of much of Pikeharnes's speech, such meanings are unlikely to have been lost on spectators. They would have been even more apparent to audiences who were, or had recently been, eating. This brings a possible double meaning to Pikeharnes's warning: audiences should ruminate upon and digest the example of Cain, carefully considering their own chances of damnation. This opportunity to *browke* the lessons of the play contrasts with the grotesque, inverted digestion associated with Cain's wisdom. By framing learning in terms of collective alimentation, Pikeharnes positions spectators in opposition to Cain, who is marked as an outsider through his refusal of commensality.

Conclusion

When read as a practical cue, alimentary language sheds light on some of the local performance practices that shaped the written texts extant in San Marino, Huntington Library, HM 1. Although *Secunda Pastorum* and *Mactacio Abel* do not explicitly engage with feasting on a scale comparable to *Prima Pastorum,* their alimentary references are similarly indicative of a dramaturgy which sought

to purposefully integrate real-world experiences of food and appetite into Biblical narrative. The ambivalence towards material food apparent across the two *Pastorum* plays demonstrates that real food and real corporeal pleasure can be sites of theological engagement, reflecting some of the ontological complexities attendant to spectators' encultured belief in the Incarnation and Real Presence. *Prima Pastorum* and *Mactacio Abel*'s use of collective eating to position spectators as a community of good learners indicates that public hospitality and commensality contributed in important ways to the plays' piety and didacticism. Thus, in their interactions with food, these plays do not simply condemn corporeal pleasure, or subordinate it to spiritual concerns; neither do they use devotional themes to justify purely secular merrymaking. Rather, by engaging with memories and experiences of alimentation, hospitality, and conviviality, the plays shape spectators' devotional responses to Biblical material through their embodied appetites, emotions and lived sense of community.

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